

The Shinobi Test

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A ninja's career is brutal and based on violence. What if the tests used by Konoha to weed out candidates reflected this simple truth?

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The Shinobi Test

[Introduction](#)

[The Test](#)

[Then Begin](#)

[Sasuke](#)

[Naruto](#)

[Sakura](#)

The Test

Naruto was disappointed.

"Are we there yet?" He complained.

"Almost," Kakashi said in a friendly voice.

"That's what you always say when I ask you!"

"And yet you keep asking."

"Naruto baka! Would you quit asking him that every five minutes?" Sakura yelled. She was every bit as frustrated and annoyed as her blond teammate, but his pointless whining was wearing on her last nerve. "You already know what he's going to say!"

Sasuke did his best not to let his own irritation show as his two annoying teammates began the same argument yet again.

"But Sakura-chan don't you want to know what our first mission is about?" Naruto whined.

They had passed the Bell Test a few days ago and become real Genin. Sensei had then given them instructions for their first mission and Team Seven had set out from Konoha. Kakashi-sensei though had refused to tell them where they were going or what they were going to do. Naruto had no doubt that he would complete the mission with flying colors no matter what it was. However not knowing just what was going on had started to wear on him.

"Of course I want to know," Sakura said with that superior tone she always had when an instructor called on her in class. "However as ninja all that matters is that we follow our orders. I am sure sensei will explain everything when the time comes."

"But how come I can't even wear my hitai-ite or my regular clothes? We're even stuck wearing these cheap sandals on our feet! We look like peasants!" It was true, all of them were dressed in faded raggedy grey work clothes. Even their sensei was going without a mask and wore an eye patch rather than his hitai-ite over his left eye.

"That's the whole point." Sakura said in her lecturing tone. "The mission requires that no one know we are ninja."

"That's not fair though!" Naruto complained loudly. "I worked so hard just so people could see I was a ninja! Now I have to pretend I'm not one!"

"Baka! A big part of being ninja is secrecy! Naturally there are going to be times when we have to disguise who we really are!" Sakura was also on edge and getting ready to take her frustrations out on her teammate.

As the two of them bickered neither bothered to notice the moss covered stone marker by the side of the road.

Sasuke glanced at it and the kanji carved into it. "We've just entered a foreign country." He gave his teammates a frosty gaze. "Could the two of you at least pretend to act like ninja?"

Naruto glared while Sakura looked about embarrassed and saw the same marker.

"Oh! We've just entered the Land of Lilies! Naturally you would notice that Sasuke-kun! You're so brilliant!"

"It doesn't take brilliance to notice a marker Sakura, you just need to pay attention." Sasuke replied coolly and turned back to the front.

Sakura's head dropped in response.

Naruto was upset. "Hey you don't need to be so rude about it you bastard! I'm sure Sakura-chan would have noticed too!"

"Don't talk to Sasuke-kun like that!" Sakura emphasized her words with one of her classic hammer blows to Naruto's jaw.

Kakashi sighed but didn't bother to lift his only visible eye from out of the little orange book he had. "As Sasuke has pointed out we've already crossed the border into the Land of Lilies. We'll be at our destination shortly."

A bruised Naruto turned disbelieving eyes his sensei's way. "Is that true or are you just saying that?"

"Yes."

Naruto stared open mouthed at Kakashi not knowing how to respond. Sakura and Sasuke just tried to not show their mounting frustration.

"Well here we are," Kakashi announced. "This is the village of Yuri."

They had arrived at the outskirts of a small peaceful looking community. It was not even a tenth of the size of Konoha and unlike their home had no wall or gate. It was a sprawl of buildings and dirt roads. The locals, at least from a distance, were going about peacefully and without any apparent care.

All three of his students looked relieved to have finally arrived. Naruto appeared to be the most excited among them.

"All right! So what's the mission sensei?"

Kakashi closed his little orange book and carefully put it away. The members of Team Seven immediately took note of that. They'd gotten to know their sensei well enough to understand that was a sign that he was actually going to be serious for a change.

"There is no mission." Kakashi told them. His voice held none of its usual playfulness; one more indication things were no longer

inconsequential.

"What?" Naruto all but exploded. "But you said..."

"I know what I said Naruto." Kakashi stated patiently. "I lied; ninja do that from time to time."

"You mean like Mizuki?" Naruto asked a bit nervously. He tried to casually put a hand on one of the kunai hidden beneath his shirt. To Kakashi the motion was ridiculously obvious.

"Relax Naruto, I promise you I am not some deep cover enemy agent."

"It's not like you would tell us if you were." Naruto grumbled.

Kakashi actually nodded in approval, for ninja being suspicious was not a bad thing.

"Excuse me sensei," Sakura spoke up. "While I don't usually agree with Naruto about things this time I think he has a point. A sensei shouldn't lie to his students."

Kakashi gave her one of his wide smiles that turned his one eye into a little upside down 'U'. "I'm afraid you are completely wrong about that Sakura. Mission leaders are often required to give their subordinates false information and false orders."

"That's not true." Sakura replied automatically.

"Oh?" Kakashi said nothing more and waited for her to elaborate.

Sakura had often seen teachers turn a foolish statement or question by a student into a lesson. Usually they did this by deliberately embarrassing the student. This had happened with Naruto with depressing regularity. She though was not used to being made an example of and didn't see where she was wrong.

"Ninja practice deception on civilians and on the enemy." Sakura began with the exact same lecturing tone she used with Naruto. "However they do not give false or inaccurate information to fellow shinobi of the Leaf. In order to function effectively all Leaf ninja should strive to only share verified information while avoiding the spread of false reports or unverified rumor."

"Sakura," Kakashi said patiently. "Has it ever once occurred to you that not everything you were taught at the Academy was true?"

She didn't reply, but by the way her mouth hung open the answer was obvious.

"So what are you saying exactly?" Sasuke asked. "That we shouldn't trust you?"

"No, you should definitely trust me. Just be aware that not every word I speak will be the truth, and also understand that I may only reveal to you as much as you need to know to complete a mission. A ninja village thrives on secrets, never forget that."

Sasuke grunted a, "Hn."

"So if it's not for a mission what are we doing here?" Naruto asked.

"I've brought you here to administer the third and final test before you can begin your careers as ninja."

"Say what?" Naruto cried in outrage. "We have to take *another* test?"

"That's right," Kakashi answered politely. "The Academy Test was just to confirm you'd at least gained the absolute minimal *physical* abilities required to be a functioning ninja. The Genin Test was to check your skill level and determine whether or not you were *emotionally* prepared. The Shinobi Test is to determine whether or not you have the *psychological* strength needed to be a ninja. The career of a ninja is brutally hard on body, mind, and soul. Before the village commits the time and resources needed to give you serious

training we need to be certain you have the necessary strength to endure it."

"Fine," Sasuke said dismissively. "I'll pass whatever test you have planned."

Sakura nodded eagerly. Whatever she needed to do to stay with Sasuke-kun she'd do.

"As the future Hokage there is no way I can let any dumb test stop me." Naruto declared. "Why'd we have to come all the way here though? Why couldn't we have just taken this test back in the village?"

"Because," Kakashi informed them pleasantly. "As a general rule Konoha tries to avoid murdering its own citizens for the sake of a test."

That got the desired reaction as all three of them stared at him wide eyed.

"What did you say?" Naruto asked.

Kakashi looked each of his students in the eye and spoke slowly and clearly. "I want each of you to go into that village and murder someone."

Then Begin

Kakashi looked each of his students in the eye and spoke slowly and clearly. "I want each of you to go into that village and murder someone."

The three students stared back at their sensei and then shared confused glances with each other.

"Is this some sort of trick?" Sakura asked hopefully. "Like with the Bell Test? You lied to us then too. You said we had to get the bells to pass and that only two of us could pass."

"Very true," Kakashi admitted. "I lied to you and gave the three of you an impossible task; no squad of Genin would ever be expected to be a match for a Jonin. However the test *did* serve a purpose, just not the one I originally told you. Now by comparison you should all have the skills to eliminate a civilian target. Especially given your target will be unsuspecting."

"Why do we have to kill someone though?" Naruto asked. His usual confident boasting was nowhere to be seen and he clearly looked shaken.

"What is the first rule of shinobi conduct?"

Naruto blinked and was taken off guard. He hadn't expected a pop quiz. He expected Sakura to jump in and answer, but it was Sasuke who spoke.

"A ninja at all times must be ready to kill or die for the sake of the village."

Kakashi nodded. "That was the very first lesson you were taught at the Academy wasn't it?"

Looking uncomfortable all three students nodded in reply.

"You have known from the very beginning that killing is a part of a ninja's duties. You shouldn't be all that surprised that before you are allowed to truly act as shinobi we would confirm your willingness to carry out such a task."

"But sensei," Sakura said apprehensively. "How will we know to kill the bad people?"

Kakashi's eyebrow rose. "Bad people?"

She nodded. "When Leaf ninja perform assassinations they target those who would harm others and who would harm society in general. People who are criminals or rebels or some other sort of danger to the innocent are the only ones who are ever targeted." When she spoke she sounded very certain of herself.

Kakashi sighed. "I can see you are going to have to unlearn a lot of the things they taught you at the Academy."

Sakura did not like hearing that.

"If everything they taught us was crap why did they even bother?" Naruto demanded. Unlike his two teammates he had struggled mightily with academics and would have been much happier just studying fighting styles and learning jutsus.

"I never said everything you learned at the Academy was wrong," Kakashi clarified. "Actually everything you were taught there served a purpose. It's just that some of it was propaganda rather than real instruction."

"Huh? What are you talking about?"

"You already know that deception is a key element to being shinobi. That doesn't only apply to missions. Very often what people believe to be true is more important than what is true. A shinobi's reputation with clients will earn him or lose him jobs regardless of his true level of ability. Wars between villages will sometimes begin just from the

impression one side or the other has become weak. We regularly spread false rumors about our competitors in order to damage their standing with clients. Manipulating and controlling the image others have of you isn't just important, it's vital."

"Oh I get it!" Naruto said excitedly. "It's like how people will want to be friends with you and ask for your autograph and buy you free ramen as soon as they realize how awesome you are and that you're going to be the next Hokage."

"Something like that."

"Okay, but I still don't get what that has to do with the Academy teaching us crap."

"Naruto, when did you become a ninja?"

"Huh? When Iruka-sensei gave me my hitai-ite after I beat up that traitor Mizuki."

"And what were you before that?"

Naruto stared at him blankly. "Huh?"

"You were a civilian," Sakura said testily. "Technically we all were until the moment we graduated." She glanced over to Sasuke. "Even members of clans were."

"That's right." Kakashi agreed. "And did every single student end up graduating?"

"Nah," Naruto said with smug grin. "A bunch of them couldn't hack it and gave up."

"Which means that despite getting some instruction in the ninja arts they are going to remain civilians. It only makes sense that we give them a more, shall we say, *idealistic* view of what it means to be a Leaf ninja? Besides, if we were too honest about what to expect we would scare away too many of the students and parents. That's why

we wait until this point to start indoctrinating you with the harsher realities of ninja life."

Sakura began to fidget. She did not like the implications of what her sensei was telling her. Until just a week ago she'd been absolutely certain she knew what it meant to be a ninja. Everything she needed to know could be found written down in a book or a scroll and teachers could be trusted to answer your questions truthfully while holding nothing back. Ninjas were heroes who fought to protect people and were honorable. Everything in her world was clearly defined.

Now her sensei was starting to show her glimpses of a much different sort of world. A place where teachers lied and where killing wasn't reserved for people who deserved it. Ninjas didn't seem quite so heroic and she hadn't heard any mention of 'honor.' What sensei was showing her was ugly and it was making her feel very, very uncomfortable.

"Now why don't I explain the rules for the test." Kakashi said.

"You weren't serious about what you said before were you sensei?" Sakura asked quietly.

"Yes I was Sakura."

"Yeah right," Naruto managed a hollow chuckle. "Like the old man would ever allow that. This is probably some sort of trick."

Kakashi shrugged. "The Hokage took this same test when he was young. So did I, so did my sensei and his sensei. So did Iruka and every other shinobi of the Leaf. Just as you had to pass the Academy and Genin tests you will have to pass this one as well or you will not be allowed to continue with your careers."

"But why?" Sakura burst out. "I don't understand why you're telling us to go kill people we've never even met who haven't done anything."

"It's exactly because these people are complete strangers to you that we want you to kill them."

"I don't understand." Sakura said sounding lost.

"Were you expecting to only have to kill people you know?"

Sakura blushed in embarrassment.

Naruto tried to come to her rescue. "I think what Sakura-chan means is why do we have to kill people who haven't done anything to deserve it?"

"Because missions are about killing who you have to or who the client wants you to, not who you think deserves it." Kakashi looked at Sakura. "Why do Leaf ninja carry out missions?"

"In order to preserve the security of the village and to bring economic wealth and prosperity." Those were the answers she had learned but Sakura sounded much less sure than she had earlier. She felt relief when Kakashi nodded his head.

"That is correct Sakura. Notice that 'bad people' have nothing to do with either purpose. In peacetime a ninja should only kill for one of three reasons; in self-defense or in the defense of a client, in order to successfully complete a mission, or if the person is the designated target of a mission." He deliberately glanced over to Sasuke. "Note, 'to gain personal vengeance' was not listed."

Silence and a stony gaze were Sasuke's only response.

"Now realistically option three won't be one you have to worry about for many years. Almost all black ops missions are assigned to the ANBU. On rare occasions an assassination may be assigned to a regular Jonin, but never to Genin or Chunin. The first two options may very definitely apply however. Any mission of C rank or higher carries with it the potential of armed conflict or the need to kill to ensure the mission success."

"What do you mean?" Naruto asked.

"Killing in self-defense or to protect a client should be self-explanatory. A mission may require you to steal an object or kidnap someone without leaving any evidence of who was responsible. If there were to be a witness present you would be expected to eliminate them. If the situation arises where killing an innocent is required to successfully complete the mission we expect you to kill."

"That... that seems kind of... evil." Sakura said in a small voice.

Kakashi shrugged. "It is. We commit evil acts; there is no way around that. The best that can be said is that we try to put them towards good ends."

"Whoa! Seriously? You say it just like that?" Naruto said. "Aren't you even going to try and deny it?"

"No," Kakashi said flatly. "Denials and justifications are for the civilians. Part of what being shinobi means is understanding that though we commit bad acts it is still possible to remain good people. But it is not easy, it can poison your mind and your soul if you are not strong enough to accept the contradiction of committing evil for the sake of a greater good."

"I've seen what can happen." Sasuke said darkly.

Kakashi nodded sympathetically. "Sometimes a mind can just break. That is part of the reason why this test is necessary."

Sakura and Naruto looked on with no clue what the two of them were referring to.

"The fact is," Kakashi continued. "To keep our village safe and to bring in the money needed to keep it prosperous requires us to do things that are unpleasant and likely to give you nightmares. When people come to us and offer to pay small fortunes for our talents it's

not because we are nice people. It's because we can get the dirty jobs done."

Kakashi took a deep breath.

"My very first black ops mission was to the capital where an old noblewoman named Zaffa wanted to have this pretty serving girl named Mokoto dealt with. She was no more than twenty two and absolutely lovely. I had dinner at the restaurant where she worked so I could observe her. It was my first assassination so I wanted to be especially careful. I'd killed plenty during the war but that wasn't the same as walking into a place knowing there was one person there whose life you were going to end."

"Wait, so this girl was just working in a restaurant?" Sakura asked.
"Why would a noblewoman want her dead?"

"Because the girl had been the favorite lover of the recently departed husband of Lady Zaffa. Apparently their marriage had been one of political convenience, not love, and he had taken many, many lovers. Mokoto was just the last in a long line of mistresses. Lady Zaffa had always felt embarrassed and humiliated by her husband's philanderings but she'd been powerless to do anything about them. When he died she decided to have his last favorite killed, probably more out of spite than anything else."

"What did you do?" Naruto asked.

"I followed her back to her apartment after her shift was over. I waited until she was asleep and then broke in and smothered her in her bed."

His students stared at him aghast.

"You killed her just because some old woman was upset?" Naruto asked weakly.

"No, I killed her because that was my mission."

"Was it worth it?" Sakura asked.

"She paid one million ryu and the village cashed the check, so I would have to say yes it was. Since it was a solo mission my share was half. I made five hundred thousand ryu for a few hours' work."

"What did you feel when she was dead?" Sasuke asked quietly.

"Satisfaction," Kakashi said. "It was a good clean professional job. If you can you should always make it quick and clean. The best way is to send them to the next world without knowing they've left this one."

"Is that really all you felt?" Sasuke asked.

"Yes, but remember I'd served in the Third Great Ninja War. I'd already gotten over a hundred kills by that time."

"What was your first one like?" Naruto asked him.

"The first one... was very hard, but they get easier."

Kakashi looked at each of them. Sasuke was as stern and solemn as ever, Naruto was unusually quiet, and Sakura looked a bit sick. He then cast his eyes up at the sky where the sun was still well above the western horizon.

"All right, let me explain the rules for this test. The first, most important rule of all, is that this test has been an S plus rank secret since before the village was founded. Each Genin squad is assigned a different foreign village or town to visit and these tests are conducted without the locals ever knowing it. They have been one of Konoha's most carefully guarded secrets and are going to remain so. That's why we all dressed in peasant clothes, why none of you knew our destination, and why none of you were told the truth about the Shinobi test until right now. Understand that whether you pass or fail this test you are forbidden to ever speak of this to anyone who is not a Leaf ninja. You will not speak of this to your spouse or your child or to your dearest friend. If you do so it means an instant sentence of

death, not just for you but for whoever you shared the secret with. Do you understand?"

Sakura and Naruto just nodded slightly while Sasuke spoke. "If the other countries knew what we were doing to their people that would ruin the village's reputation wouldn't it?"

"We still wouldn't be seen as bad as Mist, but yes, it would ruin our reputation and cost us a lot of our clients outside of Fire Country. That is why we take so many precautions."

"A ninja village runs on secrets, huh sensei?" Naruto murmured.

Kakashi was pleased to hear the observation from him. Maybe sensei's son was starting to open his eyes and see underneath the underneath.

"That's right, and as ninja part of your duty is to keep those secrets. A ninja who can't be trusted with secrets won't be one for long. Now from where the sun is I say we have about another four hours of daylight and after that the night should last about another ten. You have until sunrise to complete the test. All that is required is that you kill any one person from this village. In order to maintain secrecy you may not use a jutsu as the killing method. So Sasuke you may not use any fire jutsus."

"I wasn't planning on it any way."

"You are free to use henge or bunshins if you think they will be useful. Naruto you are free to use kage bunshin, but not where it might be seen by anyone but your victim. If people spot twenty of you walking down a street they'll realize there are ninja in their village. You not only need to kill you must kill anonymously; no witnesses can see your true face. If there are any other people about use a henge to disguise yourself, otherwise you will have to deal with the witness as well. Nothing can point back to Konoha or to ninja in general. It would be best if the deaths appeared to be from natural causes or accidents. If you can't manage that a violent death is still

fine. So long as there aren't any witnesses it will just get blamed on some local."

"What if someone innocent gets in trouble for what we do?" Sakura asked. "They might even be executed!"

"Tell me Sakura, in the Academy did they ever teach you the phrase 'collateral damage'?"

Gulping she nodded.

Kakashi performed some hand signs. " **Kage Bunshin no Jutsu** ." There were two puffs of smoke and two shadow clones came to life.

"Hey! That's a forbidden jutsu! How'd you learn it?" Naruto cried.

"In war time fewer things are forbidden Naruto. With my clones I will keep an eye on all of you. Once I confirm you've killed someone we will return to this spot to wait for the others. This is an individual test, that means once you move out you are on your own, don't try and ask me for any help and don't try to team up."

"What happened to caring about and supporting your teammates?" Naruto asked.

"That still applies for training and on missions, this is a test."

Naruto gave a grunt.

"You are free to choose any target and employ any method except jutsu. You have until sunrise to complete the test. Anyone who fails in their task is immediately and permanently relieved of ninja status. You will be required to never reveal anything about this, you already know the punishment should you fail to do so."

"Wait! So we only get one chance at this?" Sakura asked panicked.

"That's right; you have roughly fourteen hours to eliminate one unsuspecting civilian target. From the previous tests we've confirmed

each of you to possess the physical ability required for this. So any failure means you lack the necessary psychological make-up to be a ninja. There is absolutely no shame in this and you will be allowed to have a career in the civilian world. However you will not be permitted to be a shinobi."

Sakura opened her mouth to protest and say that wasn't fair. She closed it though. She could guess what sensei would say to that.

"If you have any questions ask them now. Once you move out you are completely on your own."

Sasuke spoke up with a surprising question. "Do we have to kill them inside the village or can we also kill them outside of it?"

"Anyone you come across except for me and your teammates is fair game."

Sasuke gave a single nod.

"Any other questions?"

No one said a word.

"Then begin."

Sasuke was the first one to head out jogging out not towards the village but towards the green hills beyond. Naruto put his head down and began walking with purpose towards the village. Sakura was the last, trailing well behind and moving carefully and timidly.

The three Kakashis vanished in a swirl of wind and leaves.

Sasuke

Sasuke never went near the village, choosing instead the gently rolling hills that spread out for miles instead. On the way here he had noticed the small farms and grazing fields they'd passed and how often there would be a solitary figure out working the land or tending to livestock. Based on those observations he'd decided it would be much simpler finding someone all alone outside the village than inside of it.

He ran at a steady pace keeping his eye out, but did not move anywhere near as fast as he was capable of. If anyone spotted a blur going past they might realize there were ninja in the area.

As he ran past the hills and fields he tried to spot any lone farmer or traveler that would serve his purpose. If he didn't spot anyone by nightfall he would turn around and head to the village.

While this was going on he thought about his teammates and about just how different he was from them. Both of them had been shocked when Kakashi told them the real reason they had come here. Well, in truth he had been too, but once sensei had made it clear he was serious Sasuke had accepted it with no trouble. Even while he was still in class listening to Iruka and the other teachers drone on about the, as Kakashi put it, *idealistic* aspects of being a ninja he'd found the lessons pointless. Friendship? Devotion? Honor? What did any of that have to do with being a ninja?

He had seen with his own eyes what mattered, and that was power. If you were strong enough rules and morality no longer applied to you. Gain enough power and you were literally free to do anything. On the tests he'd regurgitated back everything his teachers had fed him because he knew it was what was expected. He met all the expectations because that was the easiest way to get the things that he wanted. This test was no different.

His teammates still believed in all that nonsense the Academy had tried to drill into their heads. Sakura especially was having trouble accepting that things were not as neat and clean as in the texts. Then again she had a safe secure life where the harshest thing she'd ever had to deal with was having her parents set a curfew. (He still recalled the conversation with her where she had so blithely talked about how lucky orphans were **not** to have parents there to love and protect them.) Sakura was very intelligent about a lot of things, but she had fallen into the bad habit of assuming she always had the answer.

Naruto by comparison was a damn idiot, always shouting at the top of his lungs about how great he was. Everything he did from dressing up like a ripe piece of fruit to defacing the Hokage Monument was just a cry for attention.

It was just so pathetic.

However Sasuke was willing to give the blond a very tiny sliver of respect. No matter what else you said about him there was no denying that Naruto had guts. He had zero intelligence and almost no skill, but he was almost suicidally brave. The constant pranks showed he had no fear of the teachers, the ANBU, or even the Hokage himself. And while he would sooner die than admit it Naruto *had* taken him off guard and tied him up. (Later that day Sasuke had gotten Naruto alone and had a quiet conversation with him about what would happen if he ever told anyone about that. The idiot had kept his mouth shut so maybe he did have a sense of self-preservation after all.) Naruto had bragged about stealing a Forbidden Jutsu scroll right out from out of the Hokage's nose, of learning an S level jutsu in a single night, and of defeating their Chunin sensei Mizuki. He and Sakura had assumed he was lying until Kakashi had confirmed everything.

How the loud mouthed dead last could have managed those things remained a mystery, but they did seem to point out that Naruto had hidden depths. Unlike Sakura, Naruto had grown up poor and an orphan. He had also been the subject of an inexplicable hostility from

most of the adults. While he had not suffered anything near what Sasuke had, Naruto had suffered. For all his jokes and loud boasts Sasuke had seen the blond when he sometimes dropped the mask and let a little of his anger and bitterness show through. He suspected that when it came down to it Naruto would do anything he had to.

Sasuke saw all this as nothing more or less than one more step on his path to vengeance. There was only one man who he wanted to kill. He had no wish to take anyone else's life. However, if killing some faceless stranger meant he was closer to gaining the power he needed then he would do it with no regrets. He was ready to kill a hundred, a thousand, a thousand thousand if that was what it would take. There was no price too high to acquire the power he needed.

Sakura might believe that the world was supposed to be fair. That laws needed to be obeyed and rules followed. That there was some sort of ultimate justice that would see the heroes rewarded and the wicked punished. The idea was so stupid it almost made him physically sick. There was no order. There was no justice.

There was only power.

That was the only thing that truly mattered in this world. What was law after all but the rules the strong made to control the weak? The world was just one vast savage garden where the strong ate the weak. If you were strong enough you could do whatever you wanted. If you were weak what was there but to hide and cower and just try to survive?

That was the only absolute truth.

Sasuke spotted a shepherd on top of a hill looking over a small flock of sheep that were peacefully grazing. The shepherd looked to be a teenage not too much older than Sasuke. He had red hair and freckles and was just doing his job. There were no farmhouses

anywhere nearby, no travelers, so far as Sasuke could tell there might not be anyone else for miles.

He'd found his target.

He began running up the hill towards him. The local watched him without any concern and offered Sasuke a polite nod of the head and smile.

"Afternoon, my name is..."

Sasuke delivered a savage punch right to his stomach that doubled him over and expelled all the air from his lungs. Sasuke didn't want to know his name; he didn't want to know anything about him. He was nothing. He was a means to an end.

As the teen was bent over Sasuke delivered an expert kick with all his might right to the boy's jaw.

There was a nice audible 'snap.'

The shepherd landed and Sasuke watched as his body twitched for a few seconds. He waited for a minute after it stopped to bend over and check for a pulse. Once he confirmed there wasn't one Sasuke picked him up and took him over to the edge of the hill and dropped him. He stood there and watched the body roll all the way down to the bottom. When it came to a stop a couple of sheep bleated and shambled off. The boy came to rest at a weird angle with his arms and legs all pointing in different directions. Even from on top of the hill it was obvious the boy's head was resting to his side at an unusual angle.

"I can see why you asked if you had to go into the village." Kakashi said from behind him.

Sasuke acknowledged him with a grunt. He'd gone miles through relatively open terrain and never once spotted him. Sasuke couldn't

deny that Jonin really were amazing. He only hoped his sensei quickly taught him as many jutsus and tricks as possible.

Kakashi came over to his student's side and made a show of looking over the edge at his handiwork. "When he's discovered everyone will assume he slipped and fell and that his death was just a tragic accident."

"That's what I had in mind."

Kakashi studied Sasuke's demeanor and for the life of him couldn't see any change in it. "I wonder who it is that will discover him? His father, mother, maybe a little brother."

Sasuke gave his sensei a cold stare. "Am I supposed to care? Did you care about the waitress you smothered?"

"Oh you absolutely shouldn't care about your target. As a matter of fact it's practice to try and not even view them as people. If you should ever join the ANBU you'll notice that certain words are avoided. Murder, kill, victim, even assassinate are rarely spoken. Eliminate, remove, target... these have a much nicer ring to them don't you think?"

"I don't much care." Sasuke told him. "I did what I was supposed to right? I even did it quick and clean like you said."

"You certainly did." Kakashi admitted. "To be honest it was almost professional. Candidates tend to get a bit... *messy* sometimes. The tendency is to rush and overdo things."

"Glad I did so well then."

Kakashi smiled at him. "How do you feel?"

"Fine."

"Are you sure? If you want to talk about it I am happy to listen."

"There's nothing I want to talk about. I did what I was supposed to, that's all."

"You know Sasuke it's all right if you feel a little guilty or confused about what just happened. It's completely normal. If you have any issues or questions I am happy to listen."

"Why would I have any issues?" Sasuke asked sounding just a touch annoyed. "I passed the test right? I am officially a ninja now right? Or is there some trick to this you're about to reveal?"

"No tricks this time, no hidden objectives, you have passed the third test and are now truly a shinobi of the Leaf."

"In that case can we get going?" Sasuke began trudging down the hill back in the direction he had come.

Kakashi watched him for a moment.

Sasuke had passed the test and was now truly a ninja. Yet his reaction was a bit troubling. While it was true that ninja were expected to kill without remorse that referred to veteran ninja who learned how to harden themselves over many years. And even among the toughest Jonin there was a tendency towards obsessive behavior as a coping mechanism. Some spent their time painting the same landscapes over and over again, some smoked like chimneys, some felt the need to wear green leotards and scream about youth, and some of the really messed up ones were compulsively late to everything and read pornography out in public and in front of children.

Ninja needed to walk a very fine line. On the one hand you were expected to carry out missions that involved ending lives without letting yourself care or feel regret about it. On the other hand those who did not care at least a little were serious candidates for becoming sociopaths who saw all human life as worthless (Orochimaru) or else suddenly suffering a complete mental collapse (Itachi).

The first kill was *supposed* to be difficult. It was supposed to be the hardest. The candidates were expected to do what they needed to, but it was not meant to be easy for them. Either Sasuke was hiding his emotions exceptionally well (unlikely but not impossible) or killing really had come much too easy for him.

Kakashi began to leisurely catch up to his student.

Sasuke had passed, but Kakashi would keep a very close eye on him from this point on.

Naruto

Author's Note: Those of you who enjoy this story may also be interested in the story **Bloody Mary** which is currently being written by **Mistress Winowyl** and is an original story to be found on my website. A link is available at my fanfiction homepage.

"This is pretty good ramen mister."

"I am glad you like it."

"It's not the best I've ever had but it's still pretty good."

"I'll just have to try and make it better." The stall owner couldn't get upset about the back handed compliment. The young girl who was finishing off her bowl looked to be no more than twelve or so. She was quite lovely with bright blue eyes and long blonde hair in two pony tails. "I don't think I've ever seen you before, are you new to the village?"

The girl nodded. "My family just moved here. I've got a father, a mother, two brothers, and two sisters. We are a very loving family who all watch out for each other."

"Well that's good to hear. I hope you and your family will come by some time and become regular customers."

"I'll tell daddy how good the food is here and I'm sure he'll want to come." The girl smiled brightly at him. "Since I am new here I don't know my way yet. Are there any parts of the village that are dangerous?"

The man nodded immediately. "The village has a red light district on its north side. That's where the bars and certain other places are. It's not that dangerous but it's no place for a child, especially after dark."

"Where is this place exactly? I want to know so I can be sure to never go there."

"Just never go north of Thirteenth Street and you will be fine."

"Never go north of Thirteenth, got it." She put down money for her food and left with a friendly wave.

When Naruto had used the henge he had needed to make a deliberate effort *not* to have whisker marks appear. He had discovered quite some time ago that people always underestimated girls. They drew less suspicion and were generally more welcome.

When he had finally gotten the henge down he'd been downright shocked at how much better he'd been treated by everyone. Shop owners who couldn't stand him not only let his female version in but were actually friendly. All the people who refused to look at him suddenly smiled and saw a child instead of whatever monster he normally appeared to be.

It had suddenly occurred to him that he'd been given a way to cheat his fate. He could find friends and be welcomed anywhere in the village. All he had to do was pretend to be someone else. He'd rejected the idea and had only used the henge to help with the occasional prank and for his erotic jutsu. He didn't want to cheat in order to get some fake friendship and recognition. Naruto was damned and determined to **earn** that. He wanted people to acknowledge the real him, not some fake image. All his efforts had been aimed at that, even his dream to be Hokage was just a way to get the recognition and respect he was so hungry for.

Walking through the streets of the village of Yuri and seeing people look right at him with smiles felt weird rather than pleasant. He had to remind himself to smile back and act as though this were completely normal. His natural instinct was to be suspicious. He had to keep reminding himself that this was not Konoha and that the adults here not going to automatically shun him.

When he crossed Thirteenth Street the only immediate difference he noted was that there were a couple of bars. The people walking along the street didn't seem any different and he certainly didn't get a sense of the place being dangerous.

Back in Konoha Naruto had wandered through every part of the village except for the Uchiha compound and other restricted areas. Konoha had a lot more bars and rough neighborhoods, but there was actually almost no serious crime there. People felt safe in most places even at night. That was because the police force inside the village was made up of low level ninja. All the adult ninja who were too weak to ever make Chunin were usually kept inside the village. (Letting adult Genin perform missions might have given people the impression Leaf Ninja were weak and unskilled.) Many of the Genin were recruited into the police force and took care of the day to day routine of enforcing the village laws and protecting the civilians. This freed up the ANBU for more important tasks.

Even Genin ninja were plenty to stamp out serious criminal activity. Domestic violence, bar fights, petty thefts, and the occasional muggings were about as serious as civilian crime ever got in Konoha. The crimes sometimes committed by ninja were a different matter, and those were normally dealt with by the ANBU.

The village of Yuri was much smaller, but it didn't have ninja. Naruto noticed a few women wearing very skimpy outfits just standing about and smiling at any man who walked past. He noticed a few people just lying in the street smelling of alcohol. There were also some just hanging outside of the bars that seemed to be looking for trouble. Some people told him that a girl his age should be there and that he should head home. A couple men approached him and asked if a pretty girl would like some candy. Naruto had smiled and answered, 'maybe later.' It was still daylight and there were too many people outside.

For the last couple of hours of daylight Naruto tramped all about the red light district getting an idea of the lay of the land. His many

pranks had taught him the value of scouting a place out and knowing where the best escape routes and hiding places were. In his mind Naruto saw this as the same as planning a prank. He knew what he would do and could guess how his victim would react. By the time the sun went down and it was dark Naruto knew what he was going to do.

He simply found a spot near one of the bars and waited.

About an hour after dark he found what he wanted. A man stumbled out of a bar and spotted a pretty twelve year old girl. He began coming towards the girl. Looking a bit frightened Naruto began to walk away. The man called asking for the girl to stop for a minute. Naruto called for him to leave 'her' alone and walked a bit more quickly. The man kept following. Everyone else who was watching either didn't notice or didn't care what was happening.

Naruto had seen that many, many times. How people could just ignore things that they didn't want to deal with. He liked to think it was just that they were too weak to act, and not that they were that cold hearted.

Naruto came to an alleyway that had a couple pieces of moldy old furniture blocking off the entrance. Any one passing by would have no clear view of the rest of the alley. He easily climbed over a sofa and chair and ducked into the alley. The other end was blocked off by a chain link fence and piles of garbage. Naruto stood in front of all that garbage and just waited.

He heard the man pant and struggle to climb over the furniture. Saw the way he smiled when he spotted the little girl seemingly trapped.

"Why were you running from me sweetheart? I just want to play with you a little bit."

"Please leave me alone mister, I don't want to do anything with you." Naruto produced some tears and looked frightened.

The man licked his lips and looked excited and kept shuffling closer. "It'll be fine, trust me. All I want is to touch you a little."

Naruto gave a sigh of relief. "I am so glad you said that, it makes this easier." He ran through some hand signs. " **Kage Bunshin no Jutsu.** "

The alley filled with smoke.

"What?" The man looked about in confusion but had no chance to say anything more.

Out of the smoke two twelve year old girls expertly took out his knees and sent him to the ground. Instantly eight clones were on top of him, pinning his arms and legs and covering his mouth. As they held him down six more clones stood over him... with kunais in their hands. The man's eyes widened and he began trying to scream and thrash about. The clones holding him had to struggle to keep him quiet and held down.

The six with their knives drawn hesitated and looked back at the original.

The true Naruto glanced up at the roof tops. From the start he'd expected Kakashi to suddenly appear at the very last second and tell him to stop. He'd thought there was no way he would *really* have to kill somebody for the sake of a test. But there was no sign of Kakashi.

"Hey!" The clone covering his mouth called urgently. "We can't keep him quiet for long!"

Another clone looked back at him. "Make a decision!"

All the clones were looking at him. They were all clones and so they all understood what was going on and what he was thinking. All his life he's wanted to be a ninja and to prove to people how amazing he really was. In his dreams he saved the helpless and rescued pink

haired girls who fell instantly in love with him and beat the bad guys. It was always so amazing and glorious.

Now he was in an alleyway filled with garbage about to stab to death some sicko who liked little girls. And the guy was crying and just trying to get away, he was disgusting and pathetic; but he wanted to live just like anyone else. The thought of what he needed to do made him sick.

"Come on make a choice!" One clone holding down an arm called. "Do you want to be a ninja or not?"

He gritted his teeth and clenched his fists. That was what it came down to. It didn't have anything to do with justice or being heroic. It had to do with him being a ninja. If he failed now he would never be Hokage. All he would ever be is the little nobody everyone hated.

He couldn't let that happen.

He gave once single nod.

The six clones with the kunai understood. They turned their eyes to the man and hesitated just a heartbeat. Then they brought their knives down into his chest.

His blood splattered and gushed out. He fought with all his strength to get away. He screamed through the clone's hands, a muffled wordless cry of pure agony. His eyes were crying and looking up in terror and begging for mercy.

The blood poured out and out. His movements slowed down.

He stopped moving, but the eyes kept looking lifelessly.

The arms kept rising and falling sticking the bloody knives into his torn up bleeding chest.

Up went the blood red hands and down they came over and over and over, killing what was already dead.

Naruto jumped when he felt a hand on his shoulder.

"That's enough," Kakashi said quietly. "You've passed the test now go ahead and dismiss your clones."

"Y... yes."

Naruto did so. The clones departed in puffs of smoke. He didn't have a single drop of blood on him but he was instantly hit with the memories of brutally killing a man and seeing the look of fear in his eyes as he being murdered.

He bent over and threw up.

Kakashi sympathetically patted his back while he looked at the body. There had to be at least fifty stab wounds. "I hope any ex-lovers or anyone owing him money has an air tight alibi."

"What?" Naruto asked weakly.

"Nothing you need to worry about. You did well Naruto. I know how hard this is and you did what you needed to. No need to feel guilty."

Seeing Naruto flinch and the way he avoided looking at the body were good signs. The test was meant to be incredibly hard. It was meant to be the final true boundary between student and real ninja. From this moment on there could be no question they were different than they had been.

"He deserved it," Naruto said softly still refusing to look. "He wanted to do things with a little girl, so he deserved it."

"I was watching so I know."

Naruto looked up and nodded.

Kakashi knew that in the future Naruto might need to kill a twelve year old child. Deserving had nothing to do with who you killed. It was all about what the mission required. There would be time for that later though. If it helped him to think of it that way it was fine.

"If you want to talk about this I will be happy to listen. You can tell me or ask me anything you like."

"Thanks sensei, I think I will... later not now."

Kakashi nodded and rubbed the top of his head. "You are a ninja now Naruto. I won't lie and tell you your life will be easy or that you won't have regrets. But you have earned the right to be a shinobi, and I am proud of you."

Naruto looked at him with relief and appreciation. "Thank you sensei."

"Now let's get out of here." Putting one hand on Naruto's shoulder Kakashi performed a shunshin and the two of them vanishes in a swirl of wind and leaves.

Sakura

When Sakura and the other girls in her class had learned to master the henge it had not been long before Ino had started daring them to put it to good use. Not being one to ever back down from one of Ino's challenges she and a couple girls had accepted. This was how she, Ino and a couple others wound up in a dance club disguised as attractive teenage girls. The game was to have some guys buy them actually drinks and flirt with them and have a few dances before sneaking out again. At the time it had seemed unbelievably bold and was a real adventure.

Naturally nothing was going to actually happen! They were all ten year olds after all! And besides, Sakura was saving her first kiss and all her others firsts for Sasuke-kun. Still, just having older boys flirt with them and tasting a fruity drink with alcohol in it was new and exciting. The four of them had the time of their lives.

For about ten minutes.

Right up until a Chunin who happened to be there noticed their poorly maintained henges. The four of them had been returned to their parents and threatened with prosecution and expulsion from the Academy for 'use of the ninja arts towards unlawful and immoral purposes.' Nothing official ever came of it, but Sakura had not been able to sit down for a week. Ino never said what her punishment had been but it had taken the girl about a month to return to her usual boisterous self.

That had been the last time Sakura had ever been in a bar. Given the many lessons she had received about feminine infiltration techniques though it had seemed like an obvious place to seek out a target. The idea of going to a bar and essentially picking someone up to eliminate made her uneasy, but she still went forward with it.

A ninja does not care if something is distasteful or unpleasant; all that should ever concern a ninja is if an action furthers the mission. This is the thirty seventh rule of shinobi conduct.

Before going into the town she used an appropriate henge. She made herself appear as an attractive young woman of seventeen or so with black hair, slim legs, and a bigger than average chest. She observed the women in the village and made her clothing look appropriate, if just slightly more revealing. When she entered the village she felt as though she blended right in.

The best way to be unseen is simply to appear as what is expected. This is the nineteenth rule of shinobi conduct.

It wasn't hard to find out where the most popular bars for young people were. When she went to the north part of town she was surprised to see a twelve year old blonde girl dressed in orange tramping up and down the streets looking in every direction, obviously scouting out the place. *Well at least the baka remembered not to put any whisker marks on his henge for once.* Sakura felt the intense urge to go up to him and scream that he was doing it all wrong. Whereas her outfit was a tan and white dress that fit in perfectly no one else was wearing orange. Not to mention there were few children to be seen in this part of town.

Sakura didn't do so since Kakashi-sensei had deliberately told her not to team up. She always followed the rules.

In general follow all rules and obey all orders. This is the fifty fifth rule of shinobi conduct.

Recalling that rule she also thought about the one that followed it.

Be prepared to ignore rules and orders when necessary. This is the fifty sixth rule of shinobi conduct.

The two rules seemed blatantly contradictory and Sakura had asked Iruka-sense about it. His explanation had simply consisted of telling

her that the mission always came first and that a ninja had to remain 'mentally flexible' and put the successful completion of the mission ahead of following a specific rule or order.

Sakura hadn't been happy about the vague answer. She liked things to be clear and Iruka's response had been much too murky for her tastes.

The current situation seemed black and white enough to her. Sensei had said she was on her own and not to team up, so she wouldn't. Luckily her henge didn't look at all like the real her so Naruto never even noticed her. She felt sort of bad for Naruto. Sakura didn't think there was any way he could pass this test. In class he'd been a constant disruption and never studied. He'd been the dead last of their class and only barely made it out of the Academy. How could someone so feeble and weak minded ever manage something like this?

Granted the whole story about him and the Forbidden Scroll and beating Mizuki-sensei made her wonder, but having known him for four years she was sure it had to have been some sort of fluke. Sasuke-kun was the ideal of everything a ninja should be and Naruto was his almost exact opposite. Clearly he just did not have the stuff to be a ninja.

When it's just me and Sasuke-kun I wonder if they'll let us stay just a two man team. She could already picture it. Sasuke would have no problem passing, and despite a few worries Sakura was certain she would as well. She had after all been the top kunoichi in her class and second academically to only Sasuke-kun. Iruka-sensei had put her on the same team because it was obvious they were destined to be together. Who could possibly be a better match for Sasuke than her? So no matter what small self-doubts she had she was certain she would pass.

With visions of her wedding day dancing in her head she casually looked about the bars and the neighborhood.

She waited until about an hour after dark before strolling into the most popular bar with a teenage clientele. It took very little time for a young man to anxiously approach her.

"Hi, my name is Homoura." He said nervously. He looked to be about seventeen or eighteen and was cute, not Sasuke cute but cute.

Sakura gave him her most endearing shy smile. "My name is Aki."

"I haven't seen you around here."

"I just moved to the village, I don't know anyone."

"Can I buy you a drink?" He asked hopefully.

"I'd like that."

A ninja does whatever is required to complete the mission. This is the fifth rule of shinobi conduct.

She sat with him at a table carefully nursing a single drink as he went through five. As they sat together for a couple hours she told him the cover story she had carefully invented while scouting out the area. She had come here recently with just her mother from western fire country. Her mother was a teacher and she was hoping to become one someday as well.

Homoura was a carpenter whose family followed that trade. He was still living at home with his parents and his eight year old little sister Hana. Though he worked full time with his father in the family business he wanted to save up some more money before moving out on his own. He complained about having to look out for his little sister and about the fact he hadn't had much of a choice about becoming a carpenter.

Sakura listened and nodded sympathetically at the appropriate moments. He was obviously trying really hard to impress her. Unlike with Naruto's loud declarations he was quiet and more subtle,

though no less eager. As the night dragged on and he got more and more alcohol in him she noticed him staring more and more blatantly at her chest. Though she was only twelve she had a basic idea of what was going through his mind.

She casually glanced about the bar and saw no one paying special attention to them. She slid a hand along his arm and leaned over the table to whisper in his ear. "You want to go someplace?"

She saw his eyes widen and fear and excitement crossed his face. "S... sure!"

She stood up and took him by the arm. "Let's go then."

The areas where immediate death can be caused are the heart, brain, throat, and spine at the back of the neck. In general the most vulnerable of these will be the throat.

That had been a lesson she had learned in class a long time ago. Back then it had just been one more fact to be memorized and stored away for the next test. Now she was about to put that information to use.

Still holding him by his arm she led him to an alley she had scouted out. She took him to a spot behind a dumpster where no one would see.

Sakura stopped and looked at him. He was a little unsteady on his feet and his was breathing fast, his cheeks were flushed and he was licking his lips nervously. He had no idea at all that his life was about to end.

Behind her back Sakura palmed a kunai in her right hand. All she needed was one quick slice across the jugular and he would bleed out in less than a minute.

When the moment to act comes a ninja does not hesitate. This is the third rule of shinobi conduct.

It was the moment she needed to strike without hesitation. She clenched her blade with all her strength.

He was looking at her with so much hope and silly eagerness. He was smiling at her and just *standing* there. He wasn't even trying to grope her or get a kiss. He was obviously shy and having trouble figuring out what to do.

I wonder what his little sister will do when she hears her big brother was murdered? Her name is Hana; she's eight and a little trouble maker.

Sakura shook her head to get the thought out of her mind. Then she imagined the parents and how they would feel to know their son was dead. How about the friends he had what would they do without him? She looked at Homoura's face and imagined blood pouring from a slashed throat. Imagined him looking at her as she killed him. Why did he have to die just so she could be with Sasuke-kun?

"I really like you." He leaned forward quickly to try and kiss her.

Sakura stepped back, keeping her right hand hidden behind her back. "Don't!" She said sharply. Her first kiss was for Sasuke-kun.

"What's wrong?" He asked her in obvious confusion. "Did I do something wrong?"

He tried to steal my first kiss! He deserves it just for that!

That was her first impulse but not even Sakura could pretend that something like that was deserving of capital punishment. The fact was that he was a nice guy who had done nothing to deserve death. If she killed him now just so that she could be a ninja and be with Sasuke-kun how did that make her anything else but a murderer?

She knew the duty of a ninja was to carry out the mission no matter what. She knew all the rules of shinobi conduct and just what parts of the body to strike to inflict a mortal wound. All the justifications popped into her mind. She had an order from her sensei. Ninja were expected to kill. It was her duty to kill without remorse for the sake of the village.

But for the first time in her life she found the words didn't matter. What mattered was this teenage boy standing in front of her and whether or not she was going to stab him.

"Aki?"

She pushed past him and ran out of the alley. "I'm sorry."

"Wait! Did I do something wrong? Wait!"

She ran away as quickly as she could without looking back.

She spent the rest of the night wandering the village. In her heart she secretly hoped someone would try to assault her. She thought she might be able to do it if it were a matter of self-defense. A couple men did approach and proposition her, but when she declined they went away without doing anything more.

When the very first rays of light topped the horizon Kakashi appeared beside her, still dressed as a peasant with an eye patch.

"Sensei," she said quietly. "I... I tried but..."

"I know Sakura, I was watching all night." He did not sound angry or disappointed. He sounded sympathetic. "Go to the spot in the woods where we began. Sasuke and Naruto will be there waiting for you."

He said Sasuke and Naruto, not your teammates. "Did they both pass?"

"Yes."

"Then that means I... I failed?" It didn't seem possible. How could she not be a ninja? She'd studied so hard and done so well on the tests.

"It's nothing to be ashamed of Sakura. In a way it speaks well of you. Not everyone is cut out for this line of work. If it's any consolation you'll probably live longer and be happier than either Sasuke or Naruto will." *Especially Sasuke.*

Sakura noted that he once again failed to refer to them as her teammates. "So there really wasn't some trick?" She asked hopefully.

"I am afraid not. You may as well get going so that we can head back to Konoha." Making sure there was no one about Kakashi vanished in a puff of smoke.

The walk back to the meeting point was the longest of her whole life, it seemed to take hours and she dreaded every step.

When she got there Kakashi, Naruto, and Sasuke were patiently waiting.

Naruto was the first to speak. He ran up to her and looked at her pleadingly. "Sakura-chan! Kakashi said you failed! He's wrong right? There's no way you'd fail! Go ahead and tell him!"

She couldn't help but smile. He'd always had such total faith in her. Even if he was loud and annoying she suddenly found that very endearing. Though she felt crushed and worthless she smiled and put on a brave front.

"I am sorry Naruto-kun, sen... Kakashi-san is right. I guess I wasn't as strong as you and Sasuke-kun."

Naruto stared at her for a moment with those clear blue eyes of his. She expected him to start shouting and raging at Kakashi to let her try again. Instead he surprised her by nodding and talking to her in a low voice. "It's okay Sakura-chan; I know how hard it was for you. Just because you couldn't do it doesn't make you any less amazing."

His kindness took her totally by surprise and she had to quickly look the other way and wipe her eyes so that she didn't cry. "Well cha! Obviously!"

"Now that she's back can we go?" Sasuke asked.

Sakura glanced at him. There was not a word of sympathy or concern. Now that she was no longer one of them she really was nothing to him. The way he was looking through her she understood, she would never be with him. All her hopes and dreams were gone now.

"Hey bastard!" Naruto shouted. "Can't you at least tell Sakura-chan you're sorry she won't be part of our team anymore?"

"She was too weak, it's best she drop out now. She'd have only held me back." He deliberately began walking down the road.

Kakashi noticed the reaction but didn't say anything. Sakura was no longer a teammate but he still might have shown her just a little respect.

"Hey! Don't turn your back on us you damn bastard!"

Sakura placed a hand on his shoulder to keep him from confronting Sasuke. "Please don't. It's okay Naruto-kun, it's okay."

Naruto looked like he wanted to do more, but seeing Sakura didn't want him to he for once decided to just let the argument go.

As they headed back Sasuke led the way as usual but rather than keeping up with him Naruto hung back to keep Sakura company on

the way back. This would be the last time they traveled together and he wanted to talk to her as much as possible. To her own surprise Sakura discovered she sort of liked his attention. Now that she no longer viewed him as an obstacle to being with Sasuke he didn't seem like such bad company.

"So what happens to Team Seven now?" Sasuke eventually asked once they were back across the border and in Fire country again. "Will it be just me and the dead last?"

"No," Kakashi replied. His nose was once more stuck inside his little orange book. "Genin squads are always three man units. We'll have a new Genin transferred in, probably someone just a little bit older."

"Hn, just make sure whoever it is, is competent."

When they finally made it back to Konoha Kakashi dismissed Sasuke and Naruto giving them the next day off and telling them to meet him at the bridge at ten the following day. He said goodbye to Sakura and wished her luck in her civilian career. He gave all three of them a last reminder to never speak of what they'd just been through with anyone who was not a ninja.

After Kakashi left Sasuke turned and went without so much as a goodbye.

Naruto growled. "I'd like to kick that guy's ass."

Sakura laughed softly. Since she no longer felt the need to constantly defend Sasuke she found a lot more of the things Naruto said humorous.

Turning to face her Naruto looked depressed. "So I guess this is goodbye Sakura-chan."

"Naruto, I'm not dying or moving away. I'm sure we'll still see each other all the time."

"Yeah," by the way he said that he sounded anything but sure. For him one of the best things about being on Team Seven had been getting to see her every day. "Say I don't suppose you'd like to have some ramen with me?"

She was about to say 'no' as she always did, but stopped to consider it. Where Sasuke had completely ignored her the whole way back Naruto had been very kind and considerate. "You know Naruto I'll be honest, I always thought you were nothing but a loud mouthed idiot."

"Oh." Naruto hung his head and felt gloom cover him.

"But you know what?" She placed a hand on his arm and smiled when he looked up startled. "I think I like people like you. Sure, I'd like to get some ramen."

Very surprised, but also very happy, Naruto led her to Ichiraku's.

After reporting in Kakashi headed to the Copper Cellar, his favorite bar.

It was a bar that specialized in serving ninja so he would be able to speak freely. When he arrived he spotted Asuma at a table with Kurenai who was slumped over in front of half a dozen empty glasses and clearly drunk.

Kakashi knew what that meant.

Just in case Asuma confirmed it for him. "All my kids passed, but I'm afraid one of hers didn't."

"Which one?"

"Hinata," Kurenai slurred looking up at him. "Poor, poor Hinata, poor, poor girl." Kurenai waved an arm at the bartender. "Another!"

Kakashi had never seen Kurenai like this before. Normally she was a very light drinker. He turned a questioning eye to Asuma who answered the unspoken question as quietly as he could.

"Hyuuga Hinata, Kurenai used to escort her to and from the academy and was fond of the girl."

Kakashi nodded, but still didn't understand. "One of mine failed too, girl name of Sakura. It's a shame, but probably for the best. She'll get to have a good life."

"Hinata won't!" Kurenai said furiously. "Damn Hyuuga bastards! Bastards! Hiashi especially, to his own girl, so cruel. She's his daughter!"

Kakashi looked to Asuma. "Am I missing something?"

"You know that Hyuuga Hinata is Hiashi's daughter and a member of the Hyuuga Main Branch?"

Kakashi nodded.

"Well, since Hinata failed the Shinobi Test her father views her as a disgrace. Tomorrow morning she will have the Caged Bird Seal placed upon her and enter the Cadet Branch of the family. Hiashi has already stated he will marry her off to a minor lord as soon as she turns fifteen. He said he won't allow her to disgrace the family any further and she will not be allowed to leave their compound until the day of her wedding."

"She might as well be a prisoner." Kurenai said bitterly. "She is a sweet girl and even if she can't be a ninja she deserves better!"

Kakashi nodded sympathetically and signaled the bar to bring another round on him. "It's a hard world we live in."

Asuma and Kurenai could only nod and agree.

"Who made it so hard?" Kurenai asked.

"We did," Kakashi said thinking about his father, Obito, his sensei, Rin, and so many other good people. "All the people in all the world ninja and civilian alike. We all made this world what it is."

When the round of drinks arrived Asuma lifted his. "A toast; to this shitty fucked up world we live in."

"To this shitty fucked up world." Kakashi said cheerfully.

"Shitty and fucked up," Kurenai mumbled.

Kakashi and Kurenai both clinked glasses with Asuma's and then drank. Many more drinks were needed to get Kakashi and Asuma close to Kurenai.

The following day when it was found Hyuuga Hinata had committed suicide no one was especially surprised.

She was just one more casualty of a cruel and unforgiving world.

THE END